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Kuchel Visits Mekong Delta, Learns Reality of Viet Support

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BY WILLIAM TUOHY
Times Staff Writer

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CAN THO, South Vietnam—In an unscheduled visit to the Mekong Delta Sunday, California Sen. Thomas H. Kuchel was given a quick lesson in the difference between appearance and reality in Vietnam.

Breaking off a round of routine military briefings set for Sunday, the 57-year-old Republican accompanied U.S. pacification chief Robert W. Komer on a trip to the hamlet of Thoi An, a dozen miles south of this capital city.

There, the Phong Dinh province chief, Lt. Col. Hoa, described the progress of a revolutionary development cadre team in a nearby hamlet.

Col. Hoa said success depended on the deployment of a battalion from the crack 21st Vietnamese Army Division to protect the pacification activities.

A U.S. adviser interrupted to say: "The only trouble with the battalion is that it is not guarding the hamlet's flank. It has parked itself inside the village, and there are plenty of Viet Cong to the west."

"Is this true, Col. Hoa?" Kuchel asked.

Col. Hoa nodded.

"Why is this?" asked Kuchel.

"The battalion does not want to deploy to the west because it is more dangerous and less comfortable than settling down in the hamlet," the U.S. adviser said.

Pacification Chief Komer spoke up. "What's your recourse?" he asked.

"Well," the U.S. adviser replied, "the province chief technically has control over pacification battalions—if you look at the diagrams. But if you look at the personalities, the regimental commander runs the battalion, and the division commander runs the regiments."

What the adviser was saying was that, despite the vaunted deployment of regular Vietnamese army battalions in support of local pacification programs, this particular battalion was not responsive to the orders of the province chief.

The crowning irony was that the battalion, the second of the 33rd Regiment, was part of what U.S. headquarters says is the best divi-

sion in the Vietnamese army.

"You tell your boss," Komer told the U.S. adviser, "that Komer was here and wants the word passed to the division commander that the battalion must be properly deployed."

It was then explained that in Phong Dinh province, the "crack" 21st Division has not actually wrested any hamlets from the Viet Cong since 1965.

From the hamlet of Thoi An, Kuchel and Komer helicoptered to another hamlet, Than Thoi, in Phong Dinh, a critical province with more than 400,000 people including the largest city in the delta, Can Tho.

There, things were looking up, and government forces were pushing out into areas hotly contested by the Viet Cong until two weeks ago. Kuchel, in sport shirt and slacks, got into a sampan for a two-kilometer trip up a cocoa-colored stream to an area where government workers were beginning a census of the population, the first step in moving into contested villages.

Though the population was subdued, an old man extended his hand to the California senator.

Meets U.S. Doctors

After gingerly crossing a single-log "monkey" bridge, Kuchel ran into two doctors with the American Medical Assn. project for sending physicians here for two-month voluntary tours.

Kuchel shook hands with Dr. Neal Fisher, 47, a general surgeon from Covina, Calif.

As Komer and Kuchel headed back to their helicopter, an Army officer who serves as an adviser to the Vietnamese in the delta, said, "Senator, winning the war by bombing is an Air Force and Republican myth."

Back at Can Tho, Kuchel also learned that some of the best U.S. government advisers, proficient in Vietnamese, who would like to extend their service do not because under government regulations they cannot bring their wives to Vietnam.

Thus, the senator was told, the United States is losing the services of the most highly trained, experienced and motivated young Foreign Service officers—because after two years of service they are sometimes faced with the choice of remaining on duty or breaking up their marriages.

Kuchel arrived in Vietnam Wednesday for a six-day visit as a member of the Senate defense appropriations subcommittee. He flew to a U.S. aircraft carrier off the coast of North Vietnam, then to Marine headquarters in Da Nang, along the demilitarized zone in a helicopter, to Pleiku in the Central Highlands, and to a forward combat base near the Cambodian border.

Meets Area Soldiers

At Jackson Hole, a U.S. brigade command post near the Cambodian border, he talked with a dozen soldiers from California.

"Senator, what about this story in Stars and Stripes that the American troops are going to do the fighting and Vietnamese soldiers the pacification?" asked squad leader Ronald J. Gionni, 19, of Mill Valley. "Boy, this sure burns up a lot of us out in the backwoods."

himself on a rough-hewn bench.

"The story burned up the soldiers, too. The way I get the explanation is that the Vietnamese army is to root out the guerrilla infrastructure, while U.S. combat troops pursue the main force units."

"That's all well and good," Gionni persisted, "but up here there's no guerrillas, only the North Vietnamese army—and the Vietnamese aren't doing any fighting that I can see. We look around for them and they are behind us—way behind."

"And here's another thing that burns me. We've been here a long time and we're not making that much headway. Maybe we should make a move up in North Vietnam, or bomb some more, or something. Friends of mine are dying."

Tilting back his green fatigue cap, Kuchel paused, then said:

"I say this to you boys. I am not a military strategist who comes out here and thinks he knows it all. But unilateral cessation of the bombing would be unthinkable, particularly when you translate what it would mean in the loss of American lives."

Likes Older Tactics

"Why don't we just go ahead like we did in Europe and the Pacific in World War II?" asked Sgt. Vince Polisano, a mustached 21-year-old infantryman from Los Angeles.

"Boys," Kuchel answered, "we've never been in a situation like this before. We don't have the allies that we had before. We find ourselves in a limited war. I hope to God you agree with me. I think if communism gains a victory over these people in Southeast Asia, we will have to fight the next so-called war of national liberation much closer to home. But if communism loses here, then we will be much better off."

Later in Saigon, Kuchel said, "You can't help being impressed by our men and women out here. I think this is a valid and necessary effort and I think the message must go through to Hanoi that our commitment here is a lasting one."